

Testimony of Brooklyn Public Library
Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology
Impact of the 2017-18 State Budget on the Mission of NYS Libraries in the 21st Century
January 10, 2018

Good morning. My name is David Woloch and I am Executive Vice President for External Affairs at Brooklyn Public Library.

I would like to thank Chair Barrett and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of Brooklyn Public Library, congratulations on your appointment as Chairperson. As your outstanding work in the most recent state budget proves, libraries are an essential public resource. We are grateful to you and to Speaker Heastie for your support of New York's public libraries. Because of your leadership, Brooklyn Public Library received increased funding in the 2017-2018 state budget.

Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) is the fifth largest library system in the United States, serving the 2.5 million residents of Brooklyn with 59 branches located throughout the borough. We maintain a collection of 4 million books and 250,000 digital materials. In fiscal year 2017, we circulated nearly 15 million books, DVDs, e-books and other materials. People are using our libraries more than ever; we hosted nearly 70,000 program sessions with close to a million attendees in the last fiscal year.

Much of our programmatic work is made possible thanks to government funding, and we are grateful that you continued to direct additional resources to libraries in last year's budget. Last year, total library aid remained steady at \$95.6 million, but it is unfortunately still \$7 million shy of the amount required, and relatively equivalent to funding levels of 15 years ago. At BPL, the \$7.5 million we received went to library materials, our Business and Career Center, coordinated outreach services, services for older adults, and services for the incarcerated.

In addition to the operating dollars that you provide us, we are very grateful for the \$2.3M we received last year in Library Construction Aid. Thanks again to your leadership; Construction Aid statewide was increased over last year, after a decade of stagnation, up to \$24 million. We are putting this year's allocation toward construction of BPL's new Culture Commons at 300 Ashland Place, located in the heart of the Brooklyn Cultural District. This will be our first new library in more than three decades, serving the needs of a thriving community that is home to over 70 cultural organizations and a neighborhood that will welcome thousands of new residents over the next few years as local development continues.

This 2,700 square-foot library will focus on the diversity of arts and culture that increasingly defines Brooklyn's identity and will offer curated collections of books, magazines and other media, as well as programming—often in collaboration with local arts groups—to illuminate the seasonal cultural calendar presented locally and across NYC.

Equally, BPL is very appreciative of the assistance we receive from individual members of the legislature. We have received many State and Municipal Capital Grant (SAMs) project applications from our Assembly members around the borough, and they will be a lifeline to help improve our community rooms, upgrade our safety systems, and renovate public spaces in many branches.

Last year, we celebrated a \$3M technology grant from the members of the Brooklyn Assembly Delegation, led by Joe Lentol. Several years in the making, this grant allowed us to dramatically increase our free wifi capacity and establish a baseline level of technology at each of our branches. We now offer sophisticated equipment to every neighborhood we serve—including, Apple and Microsoft laptops, Lego Robotics and Little Bits kits, gaming consoles, portable sound systems and more. Our librarians and technology resource specialists are able to host more programs offering patrons free use of equipment that they might not have at home or in school. Thanks to this funding, we were able to offer Lego robotics in every branch, and start a league competition in one-third of our branches. This year, we will expand Brooklyn Lego Robotics to every branch in the system. This means children throughout the borough will have an opportunity to apply the coding, engineering and teamwork skills they learn in the library and enter the Lego robotics competition at any branch. Without this funding, we would never have been able to roll out technology upgrades like this, system wide.

While all of these projects have been enormously helpful, and as grateful as we are for the state aid we receive, Brooklyn Public Library has staggering capital needs that we are not close to resolving. Years of underfunding has left us with \$240 million in unmet capital needs system-wide, approximately one-third of which are emergency infrastructure needs like boilers, roofs, fire/life safety and security upgrades. BPL is facing a deferred maintenance crisis that is impacting every neighborhood in the borough.

Our libraries are aging. With a physical plant of more than 1 million square feet, Brooklyn Public Library is constantly working to maintain a state of good repair in our 59 buildings. The average BPL branch is 68 years old, most need at least \$1 million in upgrades and one-quarter of them need more than \$5 million. Eighteen of our branches are beautiful Carnegie Libraries, over 100 years old and even more costly to preserve.

Like other libraries around New York State, we are grappling with significant infrastructure needs. Every year our buildings experience unplanned closures and we lose hundreds of hours that we could have been open to the community. Many of our major systems are not functioning at all; we have many branches that are operating with *temporary* chillers in summer and heaters in the winter that are well beyond their useful life.

While we began to make progress of late with proceeds from our Brooklyn Heights library development project and an increase in City funding last year, our overall funding level continually forces us to 'triage' only a small handful of the most serious projects and leave countless, critical infrastructure needs unaddressed.

The City and State funding we receive is crucial to our ability to serve the public in safe and accessible spaces. Together, we must do more to significantly improve our libraries' ability to maintain their physical infrastructure for all New Yorkers. The state's Public Library Construction Grant funding has made a strong impact, and we commend your work to increase that funding over the last two years. We are hopeful that you can continue leading the growth of the program as our needs continue to grow.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your support of Brooklyn Public Library. We look forward to our continued partnership.